Readings, contexts, pointers, and discussion prompts for Week 9, on Revisiting Empire, Gender, and Environment in a “New” South Africa.

Primary (prescribed) literary text:

Zakes Mda, The Heart of Redness.

Optional: If you have read Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, with which this novel is in dialogue, consider what kind of dialogue Mda establishes.

FYI: ‘Redness’ here refers to the label that colonialists gave to Xhosa people who retained traditional/precolonial cultural, educational, and spiritual practices and beliefs (including the use of red ochre paint). ‘Red’ people were, in the 19thc, contrasted to ‘school’ people, the label for the Xhosa people who adopted Western practices and beliefs. It’s also worth knowing that many major 20thc black South African leaders, including Nelson Mandela, were/are amaXhosa, raised in the Eastern Cape. It’s a crucially important geo-political region, the Eastern Cape, historically and symbolically, within South Africa. From the 17th c on, it was ‘the colonial frontier’, where British colonialists were repeatedly resisted by the AmaXhosa populations whose land it was. Though this novel alludes to this history of armed resistance, it chooses instead to focus on a different kind of resistance, the spiritual millenarian cattle-killing movement.

You might find it useful to look up Wikipedia info on these South African social/ethnic groups, which are featured in the novel: the Xhosa (I find this Wikipedia entry problematic but it does give some useful info); the KhoeKhoe or Khoikhoi; the San people. It helps in understanding how Mda is presenting ethnic and cultural identity in the novel and what he is suggesting about past and present inter-ethnic cultural flows.

Optional: Useful for grasping the official cultural ideology of post-apartheid South Africa.

Vusi Mahlasela (South Africa), 'Say Africa' (prefaced by a gloss of 'ubuntu' humanistic philosophy):

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=extAAlvsjYM (Links to an external site.)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=extAAlvsjYM)

Mahlasela is an upbeat, celebrated singer-songwriter: he is, in many ways, a goodwill ambassador for the ‘new’ South Africa. He promotes here the official ideology of the new nation, in which ‘ubuntu’ philosophy (“I am because we are”) prevails, expressing a belief in social collectivism, legal equality, social reconciliation, and non-racial humanism.

To think about when you read *The Heart of Redness*:

--the way in which Mda explores and represents history—the history of this region and community, the history of South Africa more broadly. He deliberately marginalizes the period he terms here ‘the Middle Generations’—that is, the period of apartheid and anti-apartheid resistance. Instead, he divides the novel into two historical sectors, pre-apartheid 19thc, and post-apartheid late 20th c, c140 years later. Pre-apartheid: the early to mid-nineteenth century, when part of this Xhosa community, whom Mda labels ‘The Believers’, mobilized around the prophetess Nongqawuse (and others), heeding her call to kill their cattle as a response to the growing British colonization of their land. Mda represents another part of the Xhosa community in opposition to the cattle-killing, and refers to these as ‘The Unbelievers’ (which he characterizes as itself based upon spiritual belief-ie, Unbelievers are not atheistic).

What is Mda saying about history by switching between these two time zones in the way that he does throughout the novel, featuring repetitions of names, characters, and ideologies across these two distinct eras? Does the novel suggest that the present day is identical to the 19thc? Does it suggest that the 19thc version of the conflict between the Believers/Unbelievers is the same as the present-day schism? Is history, in this novel, linear, cyclical, based on repetition/reincarnation—none or all of the above? Mda has identified himself as ‘a Believer’, by the way, in interviews. Does this bias come through, in the novel? What is implied by his selection of these two periods as the focus of his story, and his marginalization of the apartheid era? How does this sidelining of apartheid compare to the Black Consciousness literature you have studied in the class?

--Mda’s use of ‘magic realism’. How magical is this narrative? Are events presented in ways that invite both magical/supernatural and realist/empirical understanding (equally)? How does Mda’s approach compare with that of Lesley Arimah, Ben Okri, Dambudzo Marechera, or Nnedi Okorafor?

--Mda’s treatment of trauma—familial, trans-generational, collective, national. The historical 1857 Cattle Killing was a traumatic episode. [It continues to be a subject of much scholarly debate; one argument, presented in this novel also, is that it had a scientific-rational basis as a means to manage the widespread illness of cattle.] British colonialism was also traumatic. How does Mda present these experiences, their inter-relations, and people’s subsequent behaviour? What do you make of the physical scars that are inherited across generations of Unbelievers? Notice how both the Believers and the Unbelievers invoke and value the discourse of the Xhosa nation, each side claiming that the other side is responsible for destroying or harming that nation. How significant in the novel as a whole is this kind of nationalism and the competing claims that surround it?

--Religion. What do you make of the role played by Christianity, indigenous religion, and blends of the two, in triggering and explaining events? As systems of making meaning, in the novel? Notice how many parallels Mda draws between these indigenous and Western religions (these include millenarian belief in resurrection of the dead and millenarian social salvation; the belief in prophets; the belief in saviors who miraculously heal illness, part waters to allow safe movement, converse with deities in burning bushes, etc; the monotheistic belief in a single supreme deity/higher power). Mda also offers a critical perspective through the 19thc Xhosa who find it horrifying that people (white Europeans) deliberately killed their own God’s son; through the Xhosa he also provocatively suggests that 19thc European science (including removal of dead human body parts for investigation) is also a type of religion. What is the effect of these parallels and critiques?

--The way in which Mda represents the present-day government—the A.N.C.—and the ‘new’ South Africa as a nation, government, and identity. There is, for Mda, nationalist hierarchy based upon activist political capital (leading to what Mda presents as, in his words, an ‘Aristocracy’). Those that danced the ‘toyi-toyi’ (figuratively and literally), are beneficiaries of the new SA, while those that voluntarily departed from the country during apartheid are presented as disenfranchised and stigmatized. How does Mda’s representation relate to Fanon’s account of neo-colonialism? Do you see Mda as cynical? As satirical? As irreverent?

--The way Mda explores the space of ‘the local’. What do you make of his presentation of local government and local community structures of organization (such as the co-operative that Camagu is involved in setting up)? Is Mda suggesting through these means that ‘decentralisation’ is the only, or the preferable, way for South Africa to progress, socially, politically, and economically? How does that compare with Fanon’s call for decentralization and co-operatives? What do you make of the role that Camagu is shown to have in ‘development’ here? Is he presented as a positive, indeed necessary, outside authority, to help the squabbling locals? What role is the present-day Dalton suggested to have? Is he portrayed critically, as repeating the British colonialism of his ancestors, or is he presented in a favorable light? (You might think about the spatial optics of Dalton’s shop, placed on high; his financial power; his fluency in Xhosa and immersion in aspects of Xhosa culture.)

--The way in which Mda represents the physical environment (in the past and in the present). And also, the way in which he depicts human, social interaction with that environment. Is the suggestion here that that eco-tourism is a progressive move? Or is it presented as another form of exploiting the land and profiteering from it? How does Mda’s representation of the land in relation to cultural heritage, identity, politics, and economics, compare with the representations of the land that you have seen earlier in literary of this class? Is Mda calling for greener capitalism, or is he criticizing capitalism?

--The way in which Mda presents women, sexuality, and/or masculinity. (By the way, the ‘immaculate conception’ of Qukezwa is biologically possible; but that is a minor factor here. More important is what Mda achieves by including it in the plot.). How sexist is this book? How is Camagu’s lust to be interpreted? How does the novel present monogamy, polygamy, and adultery, and what are the sexual politics of these representations? How does patriarchy feature in the 19thc sections, in particular, among the Unbelievers and their dismissive response to Nongqawuse (for being a young female), as well as the response by Twin-Twin to Qukezwa, his brother’s wife?

--The way in which Mda presents the arts, and more broadly, his treatment of traditional and contemporary cultures (including clothing). Does he see the commodification of art/culture as inevitable, regrettable, or empowering? Does he see culture/art as evolving, in ways that Fanon contends? And think about the novel’s concern with aesthetic beauty as a quality in humans, in environments, and as a value. What do you make of Bhonco’s fixation on beauty, and what do you make of Mda’s decision to make Xoliswa beautiful, and Qukezwa not beautiful?

--The way Mda presents communities, past and present. Look at his scenes of community interaction, and consider the roles played by dialogue, comedy, and conflict. What commentary is this literature making on the nature of community formation? On the nature of leadership (of community)? How does Mda’s approach to ‘the people’, ‘the community’, compare with that of writers you have already explored?

Discussion prompt: Write 300 or more words on any of the above reading pointers. NB: You are writing one 300 word discussion post, due Weds of week 9, and two 150-word responses to the posts of others in your Zoom group, due Fri of Week 9. You are not writing any discussion posts or responses in Week 10. I would like you to focus your energies of week 10 on writing a 100-word proposal for your final paper. More on that soon.